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## SACRAMENTALITY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

R. Walter L. Moberly

Sacraments are integral to Christian faith and theology in the mainstream churches, and much sacramental theology takes its bearings from the New Testament. The Old Testament, however, although a major part of the Christian Bible, is a collection of writings that are all pre-Christian in origin. It is thus not self-evident how best to bring this material to bear upon a Christian understanding of the sacraments.

Of course, the fact that the church has located these pre-Christian scriptures of Israel within the Christian Bible, as Old Testament alongside the New Testament, implies that they have enduring significance for the understanding of Christian faith. At the very least this can take the form of showing historical antecedents to Christian faith. But Christians have characteristically wanted to do more than this with Israel's scriptures, on the grounds that in important ways they remain both a source and a norm for Christianity. Even so, it is an open and ongoing question how best to understand and appropriate their content for this purpose.

First, a brief comment about the possible sacramental nature of these ancient texts as themselves material objects, especially in a Jewish frame of reference. Within Jewish tradition Torah scrolls are holy objects. They must be prepared according to detailed standards; they are housed in an ark in a central position at the front of a synagogue; when they are transported, it is customary to stand; and they are lovingly held in joyful dance on the festival of *Simchat Torah*. The writing of these scrolls is a hallowed and meticulous responsibility, and these scrolls, if worn out through prolonged usage, are never to be destroyed but rather laid aside in a special store room, a genizah, or given a ceremonial burial. The Torah scrolls both depict and symbolize the LORD's loving call of Israel to be His special people, and they contain the written form of the foundational story of the Jewish people and the commandments they must accordingly observe. There are obvious analogies with some Christian reverential practices with regard to the Bible, and especially certain liturgical handlings of the Gospels as the heart of Christian Scripture as the Torah is the heart of Jewish Scripture. Thus Jewish tradition ascribes to the first five books of Torah, in their material form as sacred scrolls, a significance which Christians might well consider merits the epithet 'sacramental'. Nonetheless, the focus in this essay will be on the content of Israel's scriptures in relation to sacramentality, rather than these scriptures themselves as possibly sacramental.

I will approach the issue in two ways. First, I will say something about the classic Christian way of relating the Old Testament to Christian sacraments. Secondly, I will make some suggestions as to how the notion of sacramentality might be encountered within Israel's scriptures in terms of their own conceptualities and frame of reference.

### Classic Christian Figural Reading of the Old Testament

The understanding that the content of the Old Testament in various ways adumbrates and anticipates the New Testament is present already in the New Testament, and is extensively developed by the Church Fathers. A characteristic Christian reading strategy developed in late antiquity, with a particular interest in

Old Testament content as in various ways analogical to the content of the New Testament, such that it is appropriately read in a figural manner. A major locus for this understanding of the Old Testament became Christian liturgy, and this understanding can still be seen in many mainstream Christian liturgies today. One of the best accounts of this patristic construal of the Old Testament in relation to liturgy is by Jean Danielou, S.J. (see especially Danielou 1960). Recent renewed interest in the possibility of rearticulating and reappropriating this classic approach in the light of modern literary and hermeneutical theory is well represented by the work of John Dawson (Dawson 2002). If historical accuracy and lack of anachronism is no longer the sole interpretive priority, as it typically has been in mainstream historical-critical biblical scholarship, but imaginatively serious engagement with the world depicted within the biblical texts and with their symbolic and existential dimensions becomes also an acceptable mode of intellectual engagement, then numerous possibilities for re-engagement with those modes of thought characteristic of patristic and premodern approaches can open up afresh.

Christians historically differ on precisely what counts as a sacrament (see e.g. Davison 2013:66-74). One famous difference is between Protestant churches, which allow only two sacraments, baptism and eucharist/holy communion/Lord's supper as instituted by Christ, and the Roman Catholic Church, which recognizes seven sacraments (baptism, eucharist, confirmation, ordination, marriage, anointing, confession). For simplicity I will in this section solely focus on baptism and eucharist, as this will provide sufficient opportunity to appreciate the characteristic hermeneutical strategies employed in relating these uncontested sacraments to their Old Testament antecedents, strategies which are not different in kind from those employed in relation to those other Christian practices which have also been considered sacramental.

The basic logic of a figural reading in relation to baptism is to consider significant moments in the Old Testament that involve water in conjunction with two specific concerns: deliverance and purification (Danielou [1960:78] notes 'the error of certain exegetes [who] try to recognize a type of Baptism wherever water is mentioned in the Old Testament'). The most extensive water-and-deliverance narrative is the story of Noah and the flood, and already in the New Testament this is figurally related to baptism (1 Peter 3:18-22). The next most momentous water-related event is Israel's crossing of the Red Sea which marks the climax of Israel's deliverance from Egypt and the power of the Pharaoh, and this is seen as a figure of baptism by Paul (1 Corinthians 10:1-4). Both of these are taken up and extensively developed by the Fathers, who also develop the implications of the crossing of the river Jordan, primarily by Israel under Joshua when they enter the promised land (Joshua 3-4), but also by Elijah and Elisha when Elijah is taken up to heaven (2 Kings 2:1-18).

With regard to the eucharist there are two distinct dimensions in relation to which Old Testament figures are adduced. One is the self-offering of Jesus, which can be related to Old Testament sacrifices, not least in relation to the stories of Abel and Isaac (Genesis 4; 22). The other is the participation of believers in what Jesus has done, in which the prime symbol of participation is eating, as figured in various ways in the Paschal meal (Exodus 12), the manna (Exodus 16), and in certain meals with a divine invitation attached to them (e.g. Isaiah 25:6, 55:1).

Figural readings are classically understood to be far more than pleasing imaginative exercises. As Danielou puts it, in the context of discussing types of baptism (1960:71):

In the thought of the Fathers, these types are not mere illustrations: the Old Testament figures were meant to authorize Baptism by a showing that it has been announced by a whole tradition: they are *testimonia*... And, above all, their purpose is also to explain Baptism, a purpose which still holds good today.

Moreover, different Old Testament passages can serve different theological purposes. Danielou (1960:75) observes of the Flood narrative that its symbolism 'is not primarily that of water as washing, but of water as destroying, and this will allow us to grasp the direct relationship between the rite itself and the theology of Baptism as configuration to the death of Christ'. With the crossing of the Jordan, however, 'the water here is not water considered as destroying and creating, but rather as purifying and sanctifying' (1960:100), and it thus relates closely to the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, with the further dimension of Joshua as a type of Jesus.

A figural example worth developing a little, in relation to the eucharist, is that of Melchizedek, who undoubtedly intrigues the imagination. He is mentioned only twice in the Old Testament, once as someone who is not only king of Salem [probably Jerusalem] but also priest of 'God Most High' and who brings bread and wine to Abraham and blesses him (Genesis 14:18-20), and once as an exemplar of unending priesthood for the addressee of Psalm 110 (Ps. 110:4). In the New Testament the writer to the Hebrews draws on both these passages and develops an extended analogy between the priesthood of Melchizedek and that of Christ (Heb. 5-7). His reading is imaginative and seminal. For example, the mysterious abruptness of Melchizedek's appearance and disappearance in Genesis, with the complete lack of conventional narrative markers, is read as depicting him as 'without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life', and thereby 'resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever' (Heb. 7:4). Although the writer to the Hebrews does not develop the significance of Melchizedek's bread and wine, which on its own terms in the Genesis narrative might solely signify food and drink to refresh Abraham, others were not slow to see its figural potential. Thus Cyprian says: 'For who is more a priest of the most high God than our Lord Jesus Christ, who offered sacrifice to God the Father and offered the very same thing that Melchizedek had offered, bread and wine, that is, actually, his body and blood' (*Letters* 63:4, in Sheridan 2002:26). In the sixteenth century, however, Calvin uses the silence about the bread and wine in Hebrews as the basis for arguing that a eucharistic reading of Melchizedek is unwarranted, and is merely 'the fictions of the ancients' (Calvin 2005 [1847; 1554]:390). It is probably this polemical background that makes Danielou feel the need to make the argument, in itself rather surprising, that Jesus's choice of bread and wine in the Upper Room was done with conscious reference to Melchizedek, and so 'the visible matter of the Eucharist was an effective allusion to the sacrifice of Melchisedech, an allusion willed by Christ and not imagined later by the Fathers' (1960:145).

The figure of Melchizedek could be readily read in polemical mode, not just between Protestants and Catholics, but also between Christians and Jews. The Fathers were able to follow the lead of the writer to the Hebrews, and also the argument of Paul in Romans and Galatians, to read Melchizedek as a figure whose Genesis context gives him particular significance. Not only, like Abraham, is he prior to Moses and Torah and the Levitical priesthood, but also, insofar as he blesses Abraham, he appears to be Abraham's spiritual superior. Ambrose states it sharply:

Receive what I say, to know that the mysteries of the Christians are anterior to those of the Jews. If the Jews go back to Abraham, the figure of our sacraments came before, when the high priest Melchizedek came before Abraham the victor and offered for him bread and wine. Who had the bread and wine? It was not Abraham, but Melchizedek. He it is, then, who is the author of the sacraments (*On the Sacraments* 4:10, in Danielou 1960:144)

In the late nineteenth century Franz Delitzsch (1888:412) re-expresses basic elements of this ancient understanding in more lyrical mode:

[J]ust where Abraham appears at the most ideal elevation, Melchizedek stands beside and towers above him. Melchizedek is like the setting sun of the primitive revelation made to men before their separation into nations, the last rays of which shine upon the patriarch, from whom the true light of the world is in process of coming. This sun sets to rise again in antitype in Jesus Christ, when the preparatory epoch of Israel shall have passed. In the light of this antitype the gifts of Melchizedek acquire a typical significance. They foreshadow the gifts which the exalted heavenly Priest-King brings in love for the refreshment of those who are of the faith of Abraham.

Within their own frame of reference such readings of the text can be rich and suggestive. But there are also other frames of reference for reading.

#### A Figural Reading of Naaman

Something of both the strength and the weakness of a classic figural reading of the Old Testament can be seen through a detailed consideration of the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Naaman, an Aramean/Syrian general, is, among other things, healed from 'leprosy'<sup>1</sup> when, on Elisha's instructions, he immerses himself seven times in the river Jordan. At least since the time of Origen, Naaman's immersion in the Jordan has been figurally related to baptism. As Danielou (1960:110) puts it:

[T]he aspect of baptism which is brought out by the figure of the bath of Naaman is that of purification – as ordinary water washes stains from the body, so the sacred bath purifies us by the power of God. This power, which was exercised on a physical malady with Naaman, acts on the soul in Baptism: "The healing and purifying power which, according to the Biblical

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<sup>1</sup> The scare quotes are used because a range of skin diseases is covered by the Hebrew term used. The specific affliction understood as leprosy by modern medicine, i.e. Hansen's Disease, is not necessarily envisaged.

narrative, the river Jordan had for Naaman, is the image of the purification produced by the water of baptism" [the citation is from Denzinger, *Ritus Orientalium*, 1863]

A figural reading of Naaman is also preserved in the context of Christian worship in the *Revised Common Lectionary*. In the readings for Epiphany 6 (Year B), 2 Kings 5:1-14, the story of Naaman up to and including his healing immersion in the Jordan, is paired with Mark 1:40-45, in which Jesus heals a man suffering from 'leprosy' by touching him. The primary logic is straightforward (though interestingly there is no baptismal resonance in the gospel passage). Each narrative depicts an astonishing healing of the same disease: Elisha can be seen as a figure of Jesus, and also Naaman prefigures the nameless man in the Gospel whose life is renewed by Jesus.

However, when the prime interest in the Old Testament story is Naaman's healing with its baptismal and christological resonances, it can be easy to curtail a reading of the narrative at v.14, the point at which Naaman is healed (where the story is curtailed by the lectionary compilers). Although the story is already a fascinating one to this point – through the role of the young slave girl (5:2-4), the misdirection of Naaman to the king of Israel (5:5-7), and Naaman's indignation at Elisha's failure to do or say what he expected (5:8-13) – one may not unreasonably observe that the lectionary stops just when the story is reaching its most interesting point. For the story continues:

Then Naaman returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant'. But he said, 'As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!' He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, 'If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count'. He said to him, 'Go in peace'.

There is an extraordinary richness in this short paragraph. Naaman recognizes the God of Israel as the one true God; such recognition is a basic concern elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:35,39, 1 Kings 18:21,39), and a fundamental component in historic Judaism and Christianity (and, distinctively, Islam). Elisha makes clear that God's gift of healing is given freely (a point which Elisha's servant Gehazi tries to overturn and then cash in on in the final part of the story). Although henceforth Naaman will offer his own worship exclusively to the LORD, he seeks allowance, indeed pardon, for the *prima facie* compromise inherent in his role as a personal aide to the Aramean king back in a temple in Damascus, and Elisha allows this compromise – a vignette of perennial difficult issues over loyalty and compromise which believers regularly face. If the interest is mainly in Naaman's healing and its figural resonances, that which appears to be most important within

this narrative itself may recede from view: the recognition of Israel's deity as the true God with the corollary of a practical change of allegiance, both of which are the consequence of Naaman's healing.

To be sure, the writer of a commentary who works through the whole text need not be constrained in the way that a lectionary compiler is. A good example of a contemporary re-presentation of the classic figural reading of Naaman can be seen in Peter Leithart's recent commentary on Kings (Leithart 2006), in a series explicitly designed to reconnect biblical interpretation with the classic Christian doctrinal tradition on the grounds that doctrine should illuminate Scripture.

The story of Naaman is the richest Old Testament story of baptism and anticipates Christian baptism in a number of specific ways. For starters, it is an important typological witness because the subject of baptism is a Gentile, an Aramean general... Naaman shows an admirable grasp of the implications of his baptism. Having been baptized, he realizes that he is exclusively devoted to Yahweh and promises to worship no other gods (2 Kgs. 5:17)... Like Naaman, some Christians doubt what the New Testament says about the power of baptismal water... God does wonders, but he promises to do wonders through water... Baptism is an insult to the wisdom of the world: through the foolishness of water God has chosen to save those who believe...(2006:192-94)

The rich resonance of Leithart's reading with the New Testament and Christian baptismal theology shows well how an ancient approach to the Old Testament text can be reformulated in a contemporary context.

#### Naaman's request for Israelite soil

In relation to our concern with sacramentality, Naaman's request that he be given two mule-loads of earth to take back to Syria with him deserves further reflection. How is this to be understood? He should hardly be seen as simply 'ask[ing] for a souvenir of Israel' (Hobbs 1985:60)! Naaman presumably has a practical issue in mind. He apparently envisages the earth as the most suitable material for building an altar to the LORD (akin to the specification in Exodus 20:24, 'make for me an altar of earth'), which would be the focus of all his own future worship. Since, however, such an altar would be very small, it may be that he envisages spreading out the Israelite earth to provide a base upon which a larger altar could be built. Either way, the fundamental concern would be the same: true sacrifices require holy soil for their appropriate offering. Commentators, especially Protestant commentators, are not infrequently rather dismissive of such an understanding. The great Puritan commentator Matthew Henry says: 'he would not only worship the God of Israel, but he would have clods of earth out of the prophet's garden.... He...over-values the earth of Israel, supposing that an altar of that earth would be most acceptable' (Henry 1960 [1710]: 406). Most commonly in modern commentaries, Naaman is seen to articulate a limited pre-monotheistic theology, of a kind which was widespread in his ancient context, in which the LORD is a 'national God' who 'can only be worshipped aright upon the soil of Israel's land' (Burney 1903:280), such that 'if Naaman is to worship Yahweh in Damascus then he must take back some of

Yahweh's domain with him' (Begg 1989:176). In theological terms Naaman's request for Israelite soil appears to be 'naïvely inconsistent' with his confession of the sole reality of the LORD (Gray 1977:507), and represents 'a splendid earthbound understanding of God, still far removed from the theoretical monotheism of, for instance, Deutero-Isaiah (e.g. Isa 45:5-6)' (Dietrich 2001:251). Such readings are of course possible; but they all significantly depend upon some form of polarization between the universal and spiritual confession of God and the particular and material request for earth, such that the latter downgrades or diminishes the former in one way or other. They also ignore questions about the role that the narrator sees Naaman performing in relation to his confession of Israel's God, especially given the narrator's own understanding at the outset that the LORD is the one who has given victory to Aram over Israel (2 Kgs 5:1).

In a different vein, Terence Fretheim reads Naaman's request for an altar of Israelite soil as indicating a desire to 'provid[e] a tangible and material tie to the community of faith Elisha represents' because his imminent return home and return to duties with his king means that 'the life of faith must be lived out in ambiguous situations and away from the community of faith' (Fretheim 1999:153). This is suggestive, though it arguably transposes the issue of soil into an issue of human community. Of course, it is possible that one should read the logic of Naaman's request simply as akin to that of those who cherish a garment or keepsake from a loved one from whom they are separated – a logic more of the heart than of the head, where a deeply felt action may be hard to rationalize satisfactorily. One further possibility, however, is that one might appropriately read Naaman's request as enabling a sharper differentiation between the sacrifices to the LORD that he will offer himself, and those sacrifices at which he will need to be present in the temple in Damascus. This would be because he recognizes the particular connection between the LORD and Israel, and so the presence of Israelite soil would have a material specificity that would symbolically represent Israel in such a way as to focus his understanding and identify his sacrifice as directed to the LORD, the God of Israel; in other words, it would not be the LORD's limitations but his own that would be assisted by the presence of Israelite earth. The role of Israelite earth within such a logic could arguably be recognized as sacramental.

Readings of the story of Naaman thus usefully illustrate wider issues. On the one hand, a figural reading of an Old Testament narrative in relation to Christian baptism genuinely directs the reader to significant and imaginatively suggestive elements within the pre-Christian text. Yet at the same time, such a reading may (re)direct the reader away from some of the things that are important within the story's own frame of reference. The explicit Christian recontextualization brings both gain and loss. On the other hand, the difficulty of finding the best category for depicting Naaman's request for Israelite soil underlines the intrinsic difficulty of knowing how best to read the pre-Christian text even when one is attempting to stay within its own frame of reference. The exercise of the informed and disciplined imagination, which is intrinsic to good historical work, will necessarily draw on categories that are in some way meaningful to the interpreter; and although some interpretative options can readily be identified as anachronistic, more than one option is still left in play. If the notion of sacramentality is used with some flexibility I



have suggested that it may be appropriate for depicting the nature of Naaman's request.

In any case, this issue of seeking to do justice to the pre-Christian text on its own terms anticipates, and so leads directly into, the second part of this essay.

#### Sacramentality within the Old Testament: some problems of definition

Thus far I have considered classic Christian use of the Old Testament, where the conceptual starting-point is the New Testament and a Christian frame of reference, from which the Old Testament is re-read for adumbrations and analogies of Christian realities. I will now try to consider Israel's scriptures primarily within their own frame of reference, with regard to that which might be considered sacramental within them on their own terms.

Initially, this makes it important no longer to take the meaning of 'sacrament' for granted, but rather to offer a brief account of precisely what it is that we are looking for in the Old Testament. A classic Anglican understanding of a sacrament, as articulated in the Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer*, is that it is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace...'. Valuable though this definition has been, it is nonetheless limited as a definition in that it is too broad. For such a definition could depict much that happens within a life of covenant-observance or discipleship: actions of mercy, kindness and justice could all be said to be the outward and visible signs of an otherwise inward spiritual reality. The 'spiritual' realm, in itself intrinsically invisible, is *tested for its reality* and *demonstrated* by 'moral' actions that are in principle visible and accessible. Thus, for example, King Jehoiakim's attempt to demonstrate his kingship through the construction of a palace, a prestige building project (in which he also exploited his labour force) is unfavourably contrasted by Jeremiah with the life of moral integrity demonstrated by his father, King Josiah:

Are you a king  
because you compete in cedar?  
Did not your father eat and drink  
and do justice and righteousness?  
Then it was well with him.  
He judged the cause of the poor and needy;  
then it was well.  
Is not this to know me?  
says the LORD. (Jeremiah 22:15-16, NRSV)

Josiah's consistent moral practice (where the likely idiomatic sense is that 'doing justice was like meat and drink to him'; see Moberly 2006:66) displays both the real meaning of kingship and true knowledge of God, unlike the oppressive and attention-seeking practices of Jehoiakim. Josiah's giving justice to the poor and needy is 'the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace', the mark of a living knowledge of God. (Jeremiah's concern here is similar to that of James and 1 John in the New Testament, in both of which letters the issue is what is necessary to show the reality of claims to have faith in, or know, God).

The issue of being able to demonstrate spiritual reality in moral practice, vitally important though it is, is distinct from what is usually indicated by 'sacramentality'. To be sure, there are various ways in which one can define the distinctively sacramental. In mainstream Christian understanding a sacrament is characteristically a rite which entails certain prescribed actions and makes use of certain material elements, whose core presupposition is the Incarnation, the adoption of bodily reality by God in the person of Jesus. This means that the 'material' and the 'spiritual' are not opposites to be polarized over against each other, but rather are, or at least can be, intrinsically conjoined.

The issue on which I will focus here is the importance of the material, and non-personal, realm as the possible bearer of spiritual reality in the Old Testament. That non-sentient material objects should be spiritually significant, indeed the bearers or conveyors of spiritual reality, is perhaps the prime dimension within Israel's scriptures for reflection on the nature of sacramentality. In terms of an historically-oriented reading of Israel's scriptures any notion of sacramentality cannot of course be grounded in the incarnation, for within their pre-Christian frame of reference the incarnation is a reality as yet unknown. It is necessary, therefore, to appeal rather to the importance of creation in the Old Testament, and to seek to articulate an understanding of material reality as God's handiwork, and the vehicle of His purposes. The Old Testament begins with an account of God's act of creating, and delighting in, all known reality (Genesis 1:1-2:3) and the psalmist is representative of the wider canonical collection when he affirms that 'The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it' (Ps. 24:1). Yet even so, where should one look for sacramentality in the Old Testament?

A particular notion of material objects as potentially spiritual, and so sacramental, needs also some differentiation within the historically-attested range of varying conceptions of the material as possibly spiritual. One can, for example, find accounts of premodern conceptions of reality that envisage the sacred as permeating everything in ways that are hard for those in the modern desacralized West to conceive (see e.g. Eliade 1959); and this can be helpful, although the phenomenon took distinctive forms in different cultures. Among the many wide-ranging issues here, in this context we should simply note a certain silence in the Old Testament with regard to such widespread religious phenomena as holy springs, trees, stones or caves. Of course, springs, trees, stones and caves are sometimes mentioned in religiously significant contexts: the Gihon spring in Jerusalem where Solomon is anointed and proclaimed king (1 Kgs 1:32-40); the oak of Moreh in whose proximity the LORD appeared to Abraham and Abraham built an altar (Gen. 12:6-7); the stone set up as a covenant witness by Joshua (Josh. 24:26-27); the cave at Horeb where the LORD 'passed by' Elijah (1 Kgs 19:9-18). However, the texts do not depict these as 'holy' or as significant in their own right. This might be because their sacred significance is so taken for granted that it does not need to be mentioned; earlier generations of scholars readily found self-evident traces of animism here (e.g. Oesterley & Robinson 1937:23-49). But it might also be because the writers are deliberately refraining from recognizing their sacred quality. Indeed, it is possible that even if the characters within these narratives should be imagined as conceiving these objects/places as holy, the narrator may nonetheless be tacitly directing future readers away from such an understanding. The reason for this could be the

significant 'aniconic' or 'iconoclastic' element within the Old Testament, especially its deuteronomic/deuteronomistic writings. This element develops the striking prohibition of images in the second commandment of the Decalogue, and delegitimizes many religious sites, objects and practices that were commonplace in Israel's world. On any reckoning, even if the Old Testament has narratives that may occasionally reflect the ascription of holiness to springs, trees, stones and caves, none of the narratives could be said to promote or prescribe such an understanding. So it is probably not a fruitful avenue for the consideration of sacramentality in the Old Testament.

#### Are circumcision or the manna sacramental?

If Christian sacraments are essentially actions, ritual words and gestures with material elements that carry core meaning for Christian identity, then an obvious approach is to look for rites in Israel's scriptures that are analogous to Christian sacraments. Is circumcision, for example, analogous in this way to baptism? Disappointingly, however, the answer has to be negative, for the simple reason that the Old Testament does not portray such rites. The covenantal significance of circumcision is articulated, and the practice of circumcision is initiated by Abraham (Gen. 17), but no ritual action is depicted.

To be sure, circumcision is specified with relation to God's promise to make Abraham 'the ancestor of a multitude of nations' (Gen. 17:4-8). Presumably this means that at least part of the symbolic significance of circumcision is that the marking of the male organ, which is used in the sexual act that will give rise to the next generation, ties the practice of sexual intercourse to the fulfilment of the divine promise: the particular action has meaning in the context of God's overall purposes for Israel, to whose fulfilment it contributes. In this sense, not as a rite but as a symbol, circumcision might reasonably be considered sacramental. Such symbolic significance would also be at least part of the reason why Paul in the New Testament marginalizes the significance of circumcision, because entry into the Christian community through faith and baptism has a different dynamic; one cannot be born a Christian in the same way that one can be born a Jew.

Alternatively, another obvious approach to considering the material realm as the conveyor of spiritual reality in Israel's scriptures is to look again at some of the passages which are highlighted in a figural reading. The manna, whose story is told in Exodus 16, can, as already noted, be read in relation to John 6, and seen as an anticipation of Jesus as the bread from heaven who gives his flesh and blood to be eaten and drunk by those who believe in him. But what is the significance of the manna in its pentateuchal context?

The exposition of the manna's significance in Deuteronomy 8, where Moses is the speaking voice and is addressing Israel, guides one in a particular direction:

Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one [Hebrew '*adam*' is better rendered 'humanity'] does not

live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3, NRSV)

The keynote here is the LORD's *humbling* Israel, which in context appears to mean making them cease to be self-reliant (because things were beyond their control) and thereby become teachable, open to learn. What the LORD taught them through the manna, which was something entirely unprecedented and so beyond their existing frame of reference, was that humanity depends for its existence not only on the material ('bread') but also on the relational and spiritual ('every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD'). In other words, Israel acquired an importantly non-reductive understanding of human life. This understanding is by no means assured, as Moses goes on to warn that this lesson that was learned when life was hard in the desert might be unlearned in the promised land when life will be much easier (Deut. 8:11-18). Israel might 'exalt themselves' (8:14, the opposite of being humbled) and ascribe their well-being solely to themselves and not to the LORD's enabling; that is, they might revert to a reductive understanding of themselves, in which God and God's ways become 'unnecessary'.

However, Moses' exposition does not draw attention to the intrinsic quality of the manna so much as direct attention to the obedient relationship with the LORD which it engenders. This is in keeping with the emphases of the narrative in Exodus 16, where it is the patterns of obedient daily living, the keeping of divine instruction (*torah*, Exod. 16:4) – going out and collecting, and not hoarding, for six days in the week, but not going out or collecting on the seventh day, and being provided for by a special double and durable portion from the sixth day – which are the specified purpose of the manna. In other words, the interest in the manna is less that it is a material provision of an intrinsically spiritual nature than that it is a material reality whose unusual provision teaches the spiritual lesson of trust and obedience. One might perhaps suggest that the manna is open to sacramental understanding more than that it is sacramental as such.

#### The ark as sacramental

Perhaps the object with arguably the most sacramental significance in the Old Testament is the ark of the LORD. For the ark, whose construction is linked with Moses, is closely associated with the presence, and also the power, of the LORD. This is particularly so in the narratives of 1 & 2 Samuel and the Psalms. In 2 Samuel 7, when David proposes to build a house/temple for the LORD, he says to Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent' (7:2; compare Ps. 132:1-8). When the LORD tells Nathan to decline this offer, the wording is: 'Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle...' (7:5-6). In a strong but undefined way the LORD's presence and the location of the ark are identified. Similarly, one psalm speaks of God 'going up with a shout' and another of gates being opened 'that the King of glory may come in' (Ps. 47:5, 24:7,9), where probably what is to be imagined is a ceremonial procession with the ark, and its festive acclamation, in the environs of the Jerusalem temple; as also in the wording 'Rise up, O LORD, and go to your resting-place, you and the ark of your might' (Ps. 132:8).

These assumptions about the close relationship between the LORD's presence and the ark also strikingly characterize the initial account of the ark in 1 Samuel (1 Sam. 4:1-7:2). When Israel lose to the Philistines in battle they suppose that the presence of the ark will bring them victory in future: 'Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies' (4:3). When the ark arrives in Israel's camp the Philistines hear of it and are afraid: 'Woe to us!... Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods?' [4:7-8; the Philistines speak of Israel's deity in the plural, which represents their 'pagan' understanding]. Nonetheless, they resolve to fight as best they can, and in the event they defeat Israel more crushingly than previously, and also capture the ark (4:9-11). Expectations on both sides are confounded. The reason for this is not the LORD's absence from the ark, but rather the opposite. Because Israel have, by implication, tried to utilize the ark improperly (superstitiously?), without appropriate attitude and practice on their part, it is the LORD's presence that has enhanced their defeat.

More surprises follow. The Philistines place the ark in the temple of Dagon at Ashdod; next day the statue of Dagon is prostrate on the ground. Although the statue is reinstated, the following day it is not only prostrate again but also mutilated (5:1-4). When plagues also afflict the people of Ashdod, they recognize the hand of the God of Israel, and decide not to keep the ark any longer and send it to their neighbours at Gath. But soon all Philistines, afflicted by plague, want to be rid of the ark and they send it back to Israelite territory, at Beth-shemesh, in a cart with offerings (5:6-6:12). Yet some Israelites who receive the ark themselves die, and the ark finally comes to rest at Kiriah-jearim (6:13-7:2).

It is a strange narrative. Its concern, however, seems to be to show not only that the LORD is intimately connected with the ark, but that the divine presence is dangerous to those who treat the ark complacently in one way or other, be they Israelite or Philistine. In significant ways, the logic of the narrative, especially in relation to Israel's initial loss of the ark, is akin to the logic of Jeremiah's famous temple sermon (Jer. 7:1-15). Here people complacently say, 'This is the temple of the LORD' (7:4), and correspondingly suppose that 'We are safe' (7:10), that is, they are confident that the LORD will preserve Judah from its enemies. Yet because the people's way of living is faithless and corrupt (7:3,5-7,8-9), Jeremiah pronounces their trust in the LORD's protection to be 'false/deceptive' (7:4,8). To the contrary, the LORD's presence in the temple – where the ark was housed – will mean that He will enable Judah's enemies to defeat them, destroy the temple, and carry them into exile (7:12-15). The divine presence intensifies the moral stakes.

The ark is closely associated with Mount Sinai, where Israel enter into their covenant with the LORD. The fullest accounts of it are in Exodus 25:10-16 and Deuteronomy 10:1-5, where it is depicted as a chest made of acacia wood (a type of wood that is native to the Sinai and other desert regions). The deuteronomic account emphasizes that its role is to house the tablets of stone on which were written the Ten Words/Commandments (and when the ark is brought into Solomon's temple, 'there was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses had placed there at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites', 1 Kgs. 8:9). These Words/Commandments are presented as spoken by the Lord Himself, speaking 'face to face' with Israel (Deut. 5:4, cf. 5:22-27). Although

the locating of the stone tablets in the ark can be seen as analogous to the practice of depositing legal documents in a sacred place, it also means that the ark contains that which expresses the life-giving will of the LORD for His people and symbolically represents the very covenant itself (Deut. 4:13).

Thus the ark, as the most 'sacramental' object in the Old Testament, has significant affinities with the sacramental understanding of the bread and wine in the New Testament. The bread and wine symbolize the self-giving death of Jesus which institutes the new covenant, while the ark symbolizes the heart of torah and the divine presence which constitutes Israel as God's covenant people. Even the dangerous dimension of the ark has an analogy in Paul's understanding of the potentially dangerous dimension of partaking improperly in the bread and wine (1 Cor. 11:27-32). But the dominant note in, for example, Psalms 24, 47 & 132, which appear to celebrate the ark, is awed joy.

### Conclusion

An essay such as this is necessarily preliminary. It can point towards some of the issues involved in considering the notion of sacramentality in Israel's scriptures, both within their own pre-Christian frame of reference and as the Christian Old Testament. But at best it can only be an overture for more sustained engagement with sacramentality and sacraments – which is to be found in the other essays of this collection.

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